

Online predators not distinctively dangerous sex offenders, study says

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A new University of New Hampshire study challenges the view that online predators are a distinctly dangerous variety of sex offender, requiring special programs to protect youth.

The study from the UNH Crimes against Children Research Center finds that sex offenders who target teens increasingly use Internet and cell phone communications to lure teens into sexual relationships. In crimes that involve such communications, offenders who meet and recruit youth online operate in much the same way as offenders who meet and know youth in ordinary offline environments.

"These are all [serious crimes](#)," said lead author Janis Wolak, a senior researcher at the UNH Crimes against Children Research Center. "But the so-called '[online predators](#)' are not more insidious."

The research results are presented in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* in the article "Are Crimes by Online Predators Different From Crimes by Sex Offenders Who Know Youth In-Person?" authored by Wolak and David Finkelhor, professor and director of the UNH Crimes against Children Research Center.

The study compared 143 cases where sex offenders met underage victims online with 139 cases where offenders knew victims in offline capacities, such as through their schools, families, churches or neighborhoods. All of the offenders used the Internet or cell phones to communicate with victims. The incidents came from a national sample

of law enforcement cases in which offenders were arrested for Internet-related [sex crimes](#). Details about the cases were provided by police investigators.

The majority of cases in both groups involved illegal sexual activity with underage youth, or statutory rape. Both groups involved a common dynamic: [adult men](#) who used online communications to seduce and manipulate teens, mostly girls, into [sexual relationships](#). Many offenders also solicited sexual images from victims. However, force, abduction and even identity deception were rare.

"We should stop emphasizing the dangers of online strangers. We should start teaching children and adolescents to understand and resist sexual advances from adults, whether met online or in-person and whether made through online communications or in-person. That would do more to protect young people," Wolak said.

More information: The full journal article "Are Crimes by Online Predators Different From Crimes by Sex Offenders Who Know Youth In-Person?" is available at www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S1054139X13003364

Provided by University of New Hampshire

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